How Does Halacha View Non-Jewish Holidays?

Jewish law is often asked to do something deceptively difficult: to decide what a non-Jewish holiday really is. It does so not only by examining its origins but by looking carefully at what it means now. This becomes particularly challenging in the realm of secular or quasi-secular American holidays—some of which began as explicitly Christian, pagan, or otherwise foreign but, through cultural evolution, have shed much of their religious meaning. Other holidays were always secular—and still others, in other nations, appear secular but may actually be religious.

These holidays stand in the gray space between past and present, between religious history and secular practice. And the task of halacha, as always, is to understand reality as it actually exists.

Many holidays are now experienced overwhelmingly as a nonsectarian expression of gratitude—not as a Christian ritual—demonstrating how nuanced our engagement with civil holidays can be. Take Thanksgiving, for example: While originally a Puritan celebration of the Pilgrims' survival, it has since developed into a national day of shopping and football.

Numerous sources illustrate that halacha takes the contemporary meaning of these holidays seriously—even when historical origins are not entirely neutral, or are only as secular as anything can be in a society where everyone was of one faith. Thanksgiving is the easiest example: although its origins are secular and its current observance is secular, the Pilgrims were Puritans at the end of the day, even as the holiday is fully secular. Other holidays are less clear.

This analytical method can help illuminate a broader set of holidays that American Jews confront annually: New Year's Day, Russian New Year's Day (*Novy God*), Halloween, and Valentine's Day. Each raises questions about halachic identity, cultural meaning, and the limits of Jewish participation in non-Jewish practices. And each, in its own way, demonstrates how holidays migrate and how halacha responds when they do.

New Year's Day: From Christian Feast to Civic Marker

Jan. 1 is a paradigmatic instance of a holiday whose religious origins have almost completely evaporated. Historically, it marked the Feast of the Circumcision, firmly rooted in the early Catholic liturgical calendar; Rabbi Moshe Isserless, writing 600 years ago, in his uncensored remarks in his commentary on the Tur (Darchei Moshe YD 148), writes that New Years celebrations are prohibited as the holiday is Christian. But contemporary Americans—Christians included—almost never think of Jan. 1 in religious terms. It is the beginning of the fiscal year, a day off from work, fireworks and parades, and little else.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein noted this more than 50 years ago (Iggrot Moshe, YD 2:13, written in 1963) and proposes that only the particularly pious need be strict. Rabbi Eliezer Melamed articulated this shift accurately when he recently wrote that Jan. 1 is a civil holiday with residual religious origins—one that Jews need not celebrate religiously (and certainly should not), but may participate in when the celebration is civic in nature, such as mayoral inaugurations (as will take place in New York). This is consistent with the general halachic approach I think is correct and which most Jewish law authorities adopt: what matters most is not the day's ancient and long forgotten origin but its present social meaning. Of course, the clearer the pagan origins, the clearer the secular meaning needs to be. Therefore Jewish law does not view any New Years celebration as a prohibited pagan worship.

Russian New Year (*Novy God*): A Deliberately Secular Holiday

Russian New Year—Novy God—celebrated by many Jews from the former Soviet Union in Israel and America, is a fascinating case study because it is a holiday intentionally stripped of religious content. When the Soviet regime abolished religious observance completely, it deliberately reconstituted Christmas and New Year celebrations in a secular form, borrowing visual elements from Christmas while eliminating their theological content. The Christmas tree became the "New Year's tree," and the holiday became a purely civic celebration for families. ('Novy God' means New Years in Russian, and it has nothing to do with God.)

In some ways, Novy God is similar to Thanksgiving: Both are secular holidays without religious roots (in their current form), and are therefore permissible to acknowledge within a secular context. The use of symbols that resemble Christian ones does not automatically render the 'holiday' religious when the community practicing it has reinterpreted those symbols in an entirely secular manner. This distinction—between symbol and meaning—is crucial, and it reflects halacha's sensitivity to cultural change.

Nevertheless, it is wise to avoid syncritic Christian symbols in America, as the Christian culture around us views them through a religious lens. A Novy God tree in the Soviet Union in 1975 is much more permissible than that same tree—even by a Russian emigrant family—in America, since here it is a Christmas tree! Symbols have a communal significance, and in America, a tree with decorations around Christmas time remains a deeply Christian symbol—even if it is a "New Year's tree." Thus, Novy God can be celebrated in America only with symbols that are without any Christian overtones.

Halloween: A Cultural Ritual Without Current Religious Content

Halloween is often assumed to be problematic because of its distant pagan and Christian antecedents. Yet the modern American observance of Halloween bears almost no resemblance to either. It is not a vigil of saints, nor a pagan harvest rite; it is a commercial, neighborhood-based celebration of costumes and candy. Despite pagan origins, its contemporary meaning is social and economic, not theological.

For good reasons, authorities of Jewish law remain cautious—since symbols can carry echoes of older meanings—but many others note that giving candy to a child in a costume is not religious imitation but ordinary social courtesy. One should discourage Jewish children from turning Halloween into a personal celebration, but it is difficult to argue that being polite to other people's children seeking candy implicates any pagan practices or rituals (*avodah zarah*, *darkei Emori*, or *chukot ha-goyim)*. The practice simply no longer conveys any religious meaning—indeed the costumes have moved from ghosts and goblins to Barak, Donald, Wonder Woman and Batman, reflecting Hollywood rather than any church. The religious origins therefore seem to have disappeared.

(Nonetheless, I am against trick or treating in costume, because the moral message of "give me a treat or I will do a nasty trick" is an anathema to Judaism—on Halloween or any other day. When something has a pagan origin, and it still has no positive social value, Jews should not celebrate.)

Valentine's Day: Commercial Romance, Not Christian Ritual

Valentine's Day presents another iteration of this same phenomenon as Halloween, albeit with a better social message. Whatever its origins in Catholic hagiography, today's Valentine's Day—having lost its 'Saint' before its name—is a commercialized celebration of romance or sexuality. Very few Americans know anything about St. Valentine, and even fewer attach theological significance to the day. The halachic questions therefore revolve around the meaning of participating: does giving a spouse chocolate on Feb. 14 imply acceptance of a religious holiday or even a harkening back to that? Almost no one experiences it that way, I suspect.

Here, too, I think that Jewish law permits some observances: Rather than a religious observance or an expression of promiscuous hypersexuality, giving gifts to loved ones is simply a proper expression of human affection. The holiday is now a commercial convention, not a religious rite. The religious origins have fallen by the wayside. As such, I am of the view that eating chocolate on Valentine's Day, and even giving chocolate to loved ones would seem to be permitted. The same can be said for any activity which is intrinsically of value, such as a husband expressing his love for his wife or giving flowers to a beloved, each of which would be a nice gesture all year round. Indeed, those who know me well know that I frequently bring home sweets or flowers to my wife, Channah—without whom none of my accomplishments would be possible—as an expression of love and admiration, including on Valentine's Day. Valentine's Day has a positive social message instead of a pagan one. Halloween does not.

To better understand this, consider how Japanese society celebrates Christmas, even as the nation is less than 1% Christian. The celebration was introduced by the U.S. Army during the post WWII occupation of Japan, when food, chocolate and gifts were provided to the Japanese society, then impoverished. The Christmas tradition of gift giving continues in Japan to this day, with no Christian foundation, and I think a Jew in Japan can give Christmas gifts to his Buddhist neighbors. The fact that Christmas is a Christian holiday in most of the world need not be the Jewish law rule in Japan. But, it stops when that Jew moves from Tokyo to Chicago. Holidays can be religious in one context and secular in another. Gift giving in Japan on Christmas looks more like Valentine's Day in America: the origins are distant and the values are positive.

How Halacha Understands Holidays That Change

When viewed together, these holidays form a coherent pattern. A holiday may begin in a religious tradition and evolve into a cultural practice; it may be stripped of its theological content and reinterpreted in secular terms; or it may persist as a commercial or civic event devoid of religious intention. Of course, sometimes religious holidays just stay religious.

Halacha does not—and should not—ignore these developments. Instead, it evaluates them with a clear eye, asking not merely where the practice began but what participating in it *now* expresses. These questions frequently come from Jews who work in a business setting and feel pressure to conform their gift giving with the norms around them. A classical example is, "Can I attend my business's holiday party or New Years party or even Christmas party—it is professionally good for my career to be seen?" Indeed, *poskim* are much less sympathetic to someone asking if they can go to a New Years Party because it is fun (or puts them in the right mode) than out of professional or economic concerns. I discourage people from watching Christmas movies without a real reason. Answering these questions with nuance and sensitivity is part of the responsibility of Jewish law authorities in every society.

I propose a conceptual Punnett square to analyze secular holidays according to Jewish Law. The first corner of the square comprises holidays with secular-origins, and which are celebrated in a secular context. That square consists of holidays like Columbus Day, Veterans Day, and Thanksgiving.

The diagonally opposite corner of the Punnett square is for holidays of religious origins that are still celebrated religiously by many. Christmas fits well in this square.

Next to this corner of the Punnett square are holidays that are religious in origin but are now celebrated secularly. Their religious origins are not contested as a matter of historical fact, but they play no role in the celebration of the federal holiday anymore. Examples of this are Halloween, Valentine's Day, and New Year's Day.

Diagonally across from this square are federal holidays, which, while secular in origin, are now celebrated religiously—none of which are present now in America. For example, the coronation of a new king or queen in England might fit this criterion since the ceremony is still based on explicit Church of England doctrines, takes place in Westminster Abbey church, is officiated by its Archbishop of Canterbury, and the monarch explicitly declares his or her obligation to uphold church doctrines.

Secular Origins and Secular Celebrations Today: Columbus Day, Veterans Day and Thanksgiving	**Secular Origins and Religious Celebrations Today**: None in America now (coronation of a British monarch is an example)
Religious Origins, but Fully Secular Celebrations Today: Halloween, Valentine's Day and New Year's Day	**Religious Origins and Religious Celebrations Today**: Christmas

In my book *Jewish Law and the American Thanksgiving Celebration*, I note that halachic authorities divide roughly into two methodological camps: those who emphasize original context and those who prioritize contemporary meaning. Both approaches have deep roots in halacha, yet the contemporary halachic consensus concerning Thanksgiving, New Year's Day, Novy God, and similar holidays overwhelmingly reflects the latter method. When contemporary practice conveys no religious meaning, and when participation does not signal theological assent, halachic concerns revolving around pagan practice generally fall away.

This does not mean that Jews should blur the boundaries between sacred and secular. On the contrary, clarity is essential. The Jewish calendar remains the anchor of our religious life; Rosh Hashanah does not become "Jewish New Year" in the American cultural sense, nor does Sukkot become "Jewish Thanksgiving." Civic participation is not religious practice, and halacha insists on maintaining that distinction.

But Jewish life in the modern world requires us to understand the culture we inhabit. We live among neighbors, colleagues, classmates, and fellow citizens, and many of the rituals that shape civic time are harmless, secular, and—at their best—opportunities for gratitude, kindness, and social cohesion. When halacha recognizes the difference between a religious holiday and a secular one that happens to share an origin with a religious tradition, it allows Jews to live with honesty and integrity in both calendars.

In Conclusion: Halachic Clarity in a Changing Cultural Landscape

Holidays are not static. They travel across centuries, cross borders, change in meaning, and adapt to new cultural environments. Halacha, too, has always done its work in motion, interpreting not only texts but lived realities. In evaluating secular or semi-secular holidays, halacha asks us to look closely at what the practice signifies today rather than relying solely on its historical past.

When the practice is secular, participation expresses no religious allegiance, and the boundaries between our sacred calendar and civil culture remain clear, halacha permits Jews to engage with the civic calendar in a thoughtful, measured, and responsible way. Doing so allows us to preserve the sanctity of Jewish time while participating as full members of the societies in which we live—a balance that Jews have sought, and halacha has guided, for millennia.